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# LOCKE ON SUBSTANCE

## *(Part 2 of 2)*

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Text source:

*Essay Concerning Human  
Understanding*, bk. 2 ch. 23

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# QUICK REVIEW: THE ISSUE OF SUBSTANCE

- Distinguish between **properties** (a.k.a. qualities) and **the things that have properties**.
    - We don't just say that there are the *properties* of furriness, four-leggedness, and a tendency to purr are in the room. We say 'A cat is in the room': A thing that *has properties* is in the room.
  - Locke's account of **substance** is an attempt to analyze this component of our thinking: our thought about what it is to be a thing.
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## QUICK REVIEW: LOCKE ON THE ORIGINS OF OUR IDEA OF SUBSTANCE

- Locke thinks that **our ideas of particular substances** are just complex ideas of various properties (furriness, four-leggedness, etc), *plus* the additional supposition of a substratum underlying all these properties and holding them together. (ECHU 2.23.1, 2.23.4, 2.23.6, 2.23.37)
  - The **idea of substance in general** is then the general idea, common to all our ideas of particular substances, of a substratum 'standing under' or 'upholding' the various particular properties. (2.23.2)
    - Locke's driving thought is that we can't conceive of a property existing on its own: this seems a conceptual impossibility. All properties must be the properties *of some thing*. Hence the positing of an underlying 'substratum'.
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## AN UNKNOWN SUBSTRATUM 'UNDERLYING' ALL PROPERTIES IS ALWAYS POSITED

“Hence, when we talk or think of any particular sort of corporeal substances, as horse, stone, etc., though the idea we have of them be but the collection of those several simple ideas of sensible qualities which we use to find united in the thing called horse or stone; yet **because we cannot conceive how they should exist alone, nor in one another**, we suppose them existing in, and supported by, some common subject; which support we denote by the name substance, though it be certain we have no clear or distinct idea of that thing we suppose a support.” ECHU 2.23.4

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## AGAIN, THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING POSITED BESIDES THE PROPERTIES:

- “[W]e must take notice, that our complex ideas of substances, besides all these simple ideas they are made up of, have always the confused idea of something to which they belong and in which they subsist. And therefore, when we speak of any sort of substance, we say it is a thing having such and such qualities; as a body is a thing that is extended, figured, and capable of motion; a spirit a thing capable of thinking ... These and the like fashions of speaking intimate that the substance is supposed always **something besides** the extension, figure, solidity, motion, thinking, or other observable ideas, though we know not what it is.” EHCU 2.23.3
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## BUT LOCKE CLEARLY HAS DOUBTS ABOUT THIS IDEA OF AN UNDERLYING SUBTRATUM:

- “[H]ere, as in all other cases where we use words without having clear and distinct ideas, we talk like children; who being questioned what such a thing is which they know not, readily give this satisfactory answer, that it is ***something***; which in truth signifies no more, when so used, either by children or men, but that they know not what; and that the thing they pretend to know, and talk of, is what they have no distinct idea of at all, and so are perfectly ignorant of it, and in the dark.” EHCU 2.23.2
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## MORE DOUBTS...

- “I endeavor, as much as I can, to deliver myself from those fallacies, which we are apt to put upon ourselves, by taking words for things. It helps not our ignorance, to feign a knowledge, where we have none, by making a noise with sounds, without clear and distinct significations. Names made at pleasure, neither alter the nature of things, nor make us understand them, but as they signs of, and stand for determined *ideas*. And I desire those who lay so much stress on the sound of those two syllables, substance, to consider, whether applying it, as they do, to the infinite incomprehensible GOD, to finite spirits, and to body it be in the same sense; and whether it stands for the same *idea*, when each of those three different beings are called substances?” (ECHU 2.13.18)
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# SO WHAT IS LOCKE'S CONSIDERED OPINION ABOUT SUBSTRATUM?

Some possible interpretations:

(1) He thinks we really have no idea here whatsoever.

(Talk of an underlying substratum is an unintelligible confusion.)

(2) He thinks that we have no “positive idea” of it (no determinate idea of what it *is* in itself) but nevertheless we do have a “relative idea” of what it *does*: it is that (whatever it is) that supports properties.

--Then he might hold: **(2A)** That it must exist (though we certainly don't know much about it);

--Or **(2B)** Agnosticism: he thinks we can intelligibly talk of such a thing, but never know if it actually exists or not.

(3) He doesn't have a solution. Locke finds the idea of substratum an indispensable part of our conceptual apparatus, but at the same time sees no way to make the concept respectable. (Perhaps he is just trying to bring this unsolved problem out into the open.)

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# SOME GENERAL PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTIONS TO SUBSTRATUM

- 📞 Substance is posited to 'support' qualities. But this 'support' relation is altogether obscure – it's a metaphor that is never explained.
  - 📞 Conceptual emptiness. The substratum theorist requires both that the concept of substance lack all content (b/c it has no properties whatsoever), and simultaneously that it have content (so that substratum can have explanatory value, serving as the bottom relatum in the inherence / support relation). But this is impossible.
  - 📞 Even if all properties do need to be the properties of some *thing*, couldn't *things* be understood simply in terms of '**bundles**' of co-located properties? Do we really need the additional supposition of a substratum behind all properties whatsoever?
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## A RECENT ATTEMPT TO RESCUE A VERSION OF SUBSTRATUM TALK

“Our general idea of a substratum is ... partial [that is, it focuses selectively on certain ‘leading or characteristical’ features of a thing]. And the ‘leading or characteristical’ feature of a substratum, *qua* substratum, is just its property (the most general one possible) of being the bearer of properties. It is no more obscure or unknowable than the abstract general notion of ‘property’ itself as Locke, at least, was able to see.”

“Partially considering a passionfruit, as what bears whatever properties it bears, is thinking of it under a partial, incomplete description -- as a bearer of properties. This is not to think of the passionfruit as a passionfruit kind of object, nor, of course, is it to deny it being of this kind. It is, rather, to consider the passionfruit as a bearer of properties (without attending to what those properties are) which is not itself borne as a property, or set of properties, by anything else. The passionfruit under this partial consideration, and incomplete description, is indeed the substance or substratum. Where, then, is the harm?”

C. B. Martin, “Substance Substantiated”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1980), pp.3-10; p.6, 9-10

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## ANOTHER RECENT ATTEMPT TO RESCUE A VERSION OF SUBSTRATUM TALK

“Locke needed a theory of meaning that gave him more elbow room, allowing him to understand the concept of a generalized ‘thing which...’ not in terms of a defining ‘idea’ but rather as an operator on other concepts. Then instead of condemning it because it doesn’t signify a corresponding idea-type, he could welcome it as a sign that ideas are being mentally operated on in a certain manner...”

“Applied to the notion of substance in general, that approach would yield something like the this: When I say ‘This is an orange’ I mean that there are here instances of certain properties such as orangeness, sphericalness etc., and I indicate that I am operating on my ideas of those instances in a certain combining manner”

Jonathan Bennett, “Substratum”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (1987), pp.197-215.

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